

Book Review: The Age of Noise in Britain: Hearing Modernity by James G. Mansell

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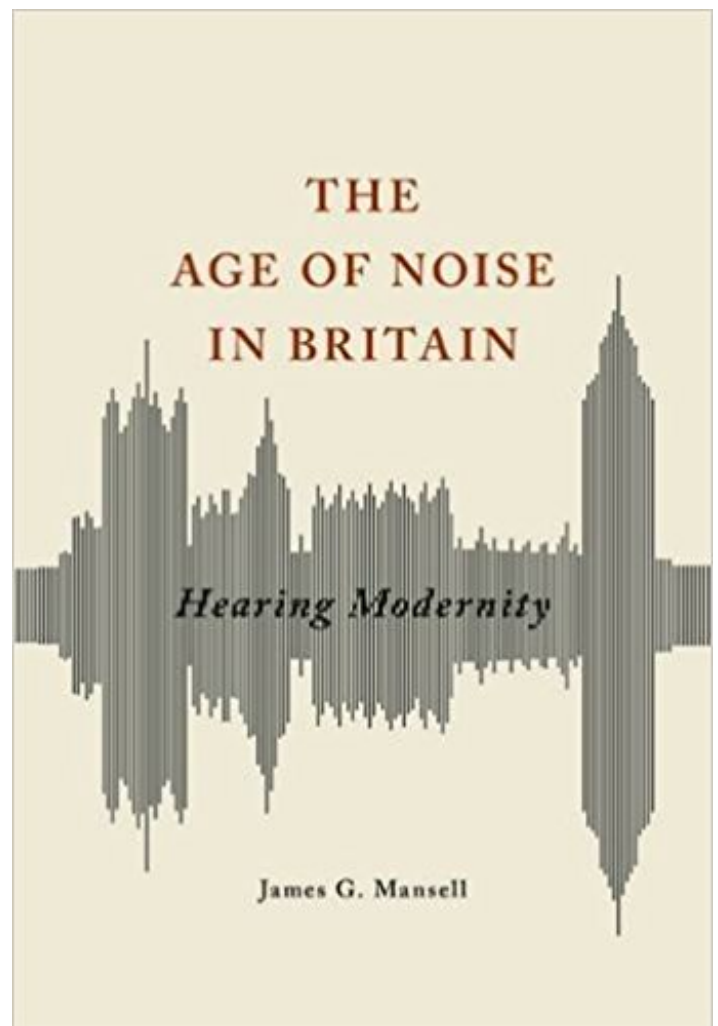
In *The Age of Noise in Britain: Hearing Modernity*, James G. Mansell considers how modernity became manifested in aural form through the growth of mechanised society between 1914 and 1945. Exploring the emergence of this 'age of noise' through such themes as subjectivity, spiritualism, nationhood and the state, this book is a welcome redress to historical studies based on textual and visual enquiry and underscores the relationship between sound and power, finds **Syamala Roberts**.

The Age of Noise in Britain: Hearing Modernity. James G. Mansell. University of Illinois Press. 2017.

Find this book: 

The twentieth century in Britain saw the arrival of gramophones, motor traffic, aeroplanes and the mechanisation of labour – all 'the clash and clatter of urban and industrial life' (1) that, in all its chaos, seemed only to signal meaninglessness. James Mansell's historiographical approach in *The Age of Noise in Britain: Hearing Modernity* is to consider sound not as a product or representative of the modern age to be analysed like visual culture or the moving image, but as 'modernity manifested in audible form' (1).

Mansell has written extensively and curated exhibitions on the cultural history of sound and hearing and on spiritualist movements such as Theosophy. At the time of writing, there is a [programme](#) available on BBC iPlayer in which he discusses his latest work. In this book, Mansell argues for an 'age of noise' in Britain, bookended by the two World Wars, during which noise was variously associated with nervousness, the constitution or disruption of subjectivity and selfhood, spiritualism, the power of the state and nationhood. In an echo of John Berger's famous 'ways of seeing' (1972), Mansell posits 'ways of hearing' (183), arguing that hearing and listening are far from passive experiences or immune to ideology. The attempts to order and manipulate hearing in the first half of the twentieth century form the subject of this study.



In the first decades of the twentieth century, many figures railed against the intrusion of noise in public life, including Dan McKenzie (*City of Din: A Tirade against Noise*) and agitators of the anti-noise campaigns. The Cambridge psychologist F. C. Bartlett wrote in *The Problem of Noise* (1934) that 'sound, like love, laughs at locksmiths' (118), identifying the threat it poses to the separation of the public and private spheres. Kant had also observed this in his *Critique of Judgement* (1790): music 'extends its influence further than desired (in the neighbourhood), and so as it were obtrudes itself, and does violence to the freedom of others who are not of the musical company'. For this reason, he held music to be the lowest art form; it is, incidentally, one of the most popular ('vulgar', in the original

sense) cultural products today.



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The critique of noise was largely due to its association with nervousness and disturbance. Modernity itself was taken as synonymous with nervousness, and indeed the discourse of shock and distraction in modern (specifically urban) life is familiar from the writings of Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin. But even Simmel, in his famous essay 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', contrasted city life with the 'slower, more habitual, more smoothly flowing rhythm of the sensory-mental phase of small town and rural existence'. In the crisis of nerves, metaphors of rhythm, vibration and harmony were especially prominent. The US neurologist George M. Beard theorised that the noise of modernity was unrhythmical and disturbed the body, unlike natural sounds (34). Terms of expenditure were also common, and fitted Beard's idea that each individual had a fixed amount of nerve energy which could be spent or reserved (30). This chimed with Simmel's notion of the *Geldwirtschaft* (money economy) of the modern city.

Mansell's introduction and first chapter focus on the activities of the Anti-Noise League and other noise abatement movements, which figured noise as a disease: a pathologisation of modernity. As he writes, 'neurasthenia [nervous exhaustion] was a critique of modernity as much as it was a medical diagnosis' (32): cause and effect were conflated. The condition's threat to workers' capacity for labour and the idea that nervous energy should be preserved as a patriotic duty were the first manifestations of the destructive potential of noise for the modern capitalist nation. This national rhetoric was only strengthened in the 'total warfare' of the Second World War.

The second chapter, 'Re-Enchanting Modernity', yields the most surprising conclusions for the non-specialist reader who might associate the age of noise with the rise of mechanised labour and the concomitant disenchantment of the world, as Max Weber argued. 'Sound *matters* in modern history,' wrote Jonathan Sterne in *The Audible Past*, pointing to the material elements of sound that were recorded, amplified and distributed over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In early twentieth-century Britain, however, mainstream science was attacked as too materialist by movements of occult spiritualism, such as the Theosophists. Unlike the anti-noise agitators, these practitioners advocated the harnessing of 'vibratory influences' (71) to attain a self in harmony with the world. Mechanical noise was still problematic because it threatened self-realisation, but certain forms of music and abstract art were held to have a good effect on the nerves. Kandinsky's treatise *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1911) was influenced by Theosophy, which was founded in New York in 1875. Annie Besant led the movement

from Madras, India, after she became president in 1908. In Britain, its figurehead was Maud MacCarthy, the ethnomusicologist, expert on Indian music and occultist who had studied with Besant. MacCarthy set up devotional concerts on Sunday mornings and a Brotherhood of Arts, Crafts and Industries, based on medieval guilds and intended to be ‘temples of magical sound’. Chapter Two is especially successful in exposing the tension and slippage between the spiritual and the secular in this period of cultural transition.

Mansell then turns to the political aspects of sound in early-twentieth-century Britain. The state intervened in two everyday soundscapes – the workplace and the home – and state filmmakers searched for the most adequate ways of representing and promoting these. One key priority was to bring the human body into harmony with the machine to counter the negative image of mechanisation. Thus, industrial psychologists began to figure ‘nervousness’ as a mental rather than physical condition, and claimed that industrial work shared a rhythm with the collective, social self which manual workers entered into. ‘Brain workers’, however, retained a personal, interior selfhood with its own rhythm, which could easily be disturbed by the pulse of industry. This led to a gendering of the noise-sufferer (female secretaries at the typewriter vs. male ‘brain workers’ who needed peace and quiet).

Sound was also increasingly co-opted into ‘the ideological work of nation building’ (149) during World War Two. In the face of Hitler’s ‘psychological war’ (172), it was imperative to stay calm in loud conditions and resist the fear of noisy aerial bombardment. It was, perhaps, a stereotypically British response: in the face of ‘a crisis of nervousness on the home front[,] stoical adaptation instead became the order of the day and the age-of-noise narrative faded as a consequence’ (182).

Mansell’s work is a welcome attempt to redress the visual and textual biases of modern historiography, and covers an area of past experience that is often assumed to be inaccessible. As a student of Modern Languages, I missed some reference to continental philosophy (Peter Szendy, for instance, who has written an excellent [history of listening](#)) and to German studies of vibration and rhythm ([Michael Cowan](#) is a figure to consult here). However, Mansell’s study usefully highlights the overlap between cultures of rationality and spirituality, and references some fascinating investigations, especially into the relationship between sound and power, if one wishes to pursue a Foucauldian line. Carolyn Birdsall’s [Nazi Soundscapes](#) and Susan Cusick’s work on isolation and the role of sound in the constitution of prisoner selfhoods (see her ‘Towards an Acoustemology of Detention in the “Global War on Terror”’ [here](#)) are two such examples. We would do well to remember that the aural sense is not free from ideology and coercion, and that studies of listening can yield conclusions that trouble the ideas suggested by visual and textual investigation.

Syamala Roberts is an MPhil student in European, Latin American and Comparative Literatures and Cultures at Jesus College, University of Cambridge. She has written on the role of listening in contemporary French philosophy, non-coercive totalities and music in Kafka and Adorno, representations of the city and the concentration camp, and is currently completing a thesis on Goethe, George Eliot and the notion of sympathy. In October 2017 she will begin doctoral research on music and sound in German literary modernism.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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